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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS JOINT DEBATES.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS JOINT DEBATES.

The Abraham Lincoln-Stephen A. Douglas debates of 1858 were unique. Never in the history of the world do we find two contending political leaders of comparable prominence conducting such debates over an extended period of time in such a manner.

In 1819 there were the McLean-Cook debates in Illinois, on slavery, but it cannot be contended that these attracted the National interest of those of a later date. We had the Webster-Hayne debates in 1830, but these were in a legislative body.

The debates were seven in number. One debate was arranged for each Congressional district, except in the two districts where the parties had already recently spoken, viz; in the Chicago and the Springfield districts.

The first debate was at Ottawa, August 21, 1858. From 1832 to 1852 LaSalle County had always voted Democratic. In 1854 it was in the Whig column and in 1856 it was Republican. Lincoln was among his friends here. Between 12,000 and 20,000 people were present. The estimate of the number present at any debate depended upon the party making the claim.

At Freeport, six days later, 15,000 attended. Stephenson County also was Republican in 1856. Here is where Lincoln asked the famous "Freeport question". Lincoln was undoubtedly the favorite here as he was at Ottawa.

On September 15 th the third debate was held at Jonesboro, where only 2,000 people attended. Here was the least attendance and interest of any of the series. Of course Union County was Democratic and pro-slavery but it must be remembered that the County was

pro-Buchanan and against Douglas in the Buchanan-Douglas struggle in the Democratic party.

Three days later, the debaters moved to Charleston, Illinois where between 12,000 and 15,000 people attended. There was intense partisanship here. Douglas probably had the crowd with him at this place.

On October 7, the fifth debate was held at Galesburg where between 15,000 and 20,000 people attended. Knox College seems to have lead in the support of Lincoln while Lombard College favored Douglas although there were partisans of each in both schools. Galesburg was distinctly a Lincoln town.

On October 13th, the debaters met at Quincy. There were from 12,000 to 15,000 present. Adams County, lead by W. A. Richardson who was later United States Senator, was Democratic. The sentiment here favored Douglas. O. H. Browning, later the Republican United States Senator, and many other prominent men, favored Lincoln.

The last debate was at Alton, which like Quincy, was on the Mississippi River. The influence of Missouri slavery sentiment had its effect at both places. Alton was predominately Southern. The fact that no monument was placed over the grave of Elijah Lovejoy for many years after his death, is an indication of the lack of sympathy toward the views that Lincoln held. It is estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 people came to this debate and Douglas was the favorite of this crowd.

For the most part the speeches were impromptu or extemporaneous. They were "stump speeches" of the highest order. They were not polished orations and were not intended to be. The whim of the moment or the unexpected opportunity for advantage would change any carefully prepared

outline. The most dramatic incident in the joint debates occurred at Charleston. Douglas had charged that during the Mexican War, Lincoln, as Congressman, had voted against supplies for the army and that thereby Lincoln starved the soldiers who were fighting our battle. Lincoln observed O. B. Ficklin, a Democrat who supported Douglas and who was in Congress with Lincoln, grabbed Ficklin by his coat collar, forced him to the platform and made him deny the charge.

There was no agreement as to what the candidates should discuss. The subjects were left to the debaters themselves. But one question overshadowed all others. "Should slavery be permitted in the territories of the United States?" This was the gist of the argument. Lincoln said "no". It is probably not correct to say Douglas upheld the idea. The position of Douglas in these debates was the same as he had often taken on the question in public life. He did not care whether slavery was voted up or voted down. Whatever the result, it made no difference to him what the voters said as to slavery. He was for popular sovereignty, or the right of the residents of the territories to decide the question.

The joint debates produced just what "stump speeches" usually produce; many sound arguments, some "horse-play", some exaggerations, mis-leading statements and untruths. Personal abuse was not absent.

At Ottawa Douglas charged that Lincoln and Trumbull were seeking to form an abolitionist party and he often referred to the "Black Republican Party." He criticized Lincoln's attitude in the Mexican War and the latter's statement that the United States could not exist half slave and half free. He claimed Lincoln was

trying to dissolve the Union and favored social and political equality of the negroes and the whites. Lincoln's speech might well have been called a defense of the charges of his opponent. He argued that the negro had the equal right with any man to eat bread earned by his own toil, and charged that Douglas was planning for the "perpetuity and nationalism of slavery".

At Freeport Lincoln answered the seven questions asked by Douglas at Ottawa and in return asked four questions. One of these was the famous so-called "Freeport Question" to which Douglas replied that the people of the territory could, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution. Joseph Medill and Lincoln proceeded from Macomb to Freeport on the morning of August 27th. On the way North, Lincoln called Medill to a seat beside him and asked his advice on asking the question. Medill argued against it but could make no impression on the other man who refused to change its form or substance stating that he intended "to spear it at Douglas" that afternoon. All of Lincoln's friends advised him against asking the question, saying that it would cost him the election. Nevertheless it was asked. It lost votes for Lincoln in 1858 but cost Douglas heavily in 1860.

At Jonesboro, Douglas claimed that the words in the Declaration of Independence "all men" being created equal meant "all white men". This was in a section where there was the greatest prejudice against the negro. Lincoln stressed the "Freeport Question" again and raised five points which proved the fallacy of Douglas' position. He did this by showing that no power could exclude slavery from a territory without violating the Constitution which recognized

slaves as property according to the Supreme Court; that Douglas had argued that excluding slavery should be decided by the Supreme Court but under his doctrine of popular sovereignty he denies it; the proposition that slavery cannot enter a new country was proved false by the Dred Scott case; that an official swearing to support the Constitution guaranteeing the right to hold slaves, could not conscientiously defeat that right by withholding legislation for that purpose.

At Charleston, which was the home County of Thomas and Sarah Bush Lincoln, the matters of the Kansas Constitution, racial equality and abolition were some of the items of contention.

At Galesburg, Douglas charged that Lincoln claimed one thing in the Northern part of the State, another in the central part and a third in the Southern part in regard to the negro and the slavery questions. As a matter of fact, of course, this was not true and judged by present day standards of men in public life, Lincoln could be judged almost perfect as to truth in debates or in any other discussion. Lincoln discussed the Dred Scott decision which affirmed the right of property in a slave and charged that Douglas was not prepared to show that no Constitution or law can destroy that right. Lincoln all through the debates referred to "Judge" Douglas and not "Senator". At Galesburg, Lincoln charged that the title of "Judge" was secured by helping break down the Supreme Court of Illinois, and later becoming a judge in that reorganized Court.

At Quincy, Lincoln stressed the moral issue of slavery and Douglas discussed the "house divided" question.

At Alton where the last of the debates was held, Douglas generally reviewed all of the questions raised in the six previous debates saying that a sectional party should not be allowed to convert the North and South into enemies. Lincoln claimed that the first man to state "all men" in the Declaration of Independence did not include the negro was Chief Justice Roger Taney and the next one was Douglas. Why did not Douglas leave the slave question alone? The Republican Party insisted that slavery be treated as a wrong. Douglas in his rejoinder claimed that Lincoln took sides with Mexico against his own Country. Douglas again stated his position when he said if the people want slavery let them have it; if they do not want it, allow them to refuse and discourage it.

Lincoln won in the popular vote but lost when the State Legislature cast its votes, because of the apportionment of the State.

Much has been written about these debates as to their merits and effects and many conclusions drawn. Douglas was as well known in public life at the time as anyone in the United States. Lincoln was not unknown Nationally but the debates helped him immeasurably with the people of other states. The debates were carried in all the newspapers of Illinois and many newspapers in the United States outside of Illinois. As an example, the New York Post sent a reporter to cover the speeches. As early as April 1860 the debates were in book form. This was before the Republican nomination in Chicago. At least 24,000 copies of the debates were published in book form prior to the election.

There were many results of the debates. A few significant ones should be remembered.

1. The untenable position and impossible theory of Douglas combined with the complete exposure of any moral scruples regarding the right or wrong of slavery were important. By 1860 the import was familiar to more people than in 1858. In passing it should be said that with his defects, the American people should always be grateful for the Stephen A. Douglas of 1861 who said that there were only two classes of people, "patriots and traitors" and who on his death bed said "Tell my children to uphold the Constitution and obey their Country's laws."

2. The debates proved that the independent thinking, high-principled Lincoln who had met on the circuit and on the stump, in law suits and in politics, in rough and tumble combat and otherwise, the best debaters and orators that Illinois ever produced--including J. T. Stuart, S. T. Logan, Leonard Swett, O. H. Browning, W. F. Linder and Lyman Trumbull, was more than a match for the best and strongest debater of the Democratic party in the United States. Douglas had met Lincoln before and he knew that he was meeting a worthy competitor.

3. The newspapers that favored Lincoln and reported the speeches, became the nucleus of influence without which Lincoln would not have secured the nomination or election in 1860. Two newspapers in Illinois are illustrative of this help. The Chicago Press and Tribune in the State and to a lesser extent in the Nation, and The Pantagraph of Bloomington, Illinois in Central Illinois, became Lincoln's champions for the Presidency. The newspapers solidified the sentiment. This does not minimize the publication in book form of the debates as the books were of some influence prior to the nomination.

4. As a corollary to No. 3, it is inconceivable that Lincoln could have been nominated in 1860 had the debates not taken place. His nomination and election have changed the history of the World so the significance of the debates has unlimited ramifications and possibilities of exploration. Limitless time would be necessary to enlarge upon this idea.

5. The answer to the "Freeport Question" by Douglas gave his stand a striking National prominence although it was a reiteration of his previous views. When the full import of his answer was conceived by the leaders of his own party, Douglas became the leader of only the Northern branch of the Democratic party, having alienated the Southern extremists. He was no longer the National leader of a party. He became a sectionalist as he charged Lincoln to be. When Douglas returned to Washington he had been supplanted by Jefferson Davis as chairman of the committee on territories. No matter what would have happened without the debates, Douglas lost the Presidency with the debates.

6. Lincoln's policies, principles and ideals became the accepted platform of his party in Illinois instead of the thoughts of Trumbull or the other anti-Nebraska Democrats. Even though the Republican party did not follow Lincoln's principles of 1858 entirely they were of greater influence and of more importance than those of any other Republican and to that extent Lincoln's principles as set out in the debates became the platform of the Republican Party.

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